Methodist History, 36:1 (October 1997)

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE IN LIGHT OF 18TH CENTURY BIBLICAL CRITICISM

BARRY C. DAVIS

Charles Dickens began his monumental work, *Little Dorrit*, with the following words:

> Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day.
>
> A blazing sun upon a fierce August day was no greater rarity in southern France then, than at any other time, before or since. Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away. The only things to be seen not fixedly staring and glaring were the vines drooping under their load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little, as the hot air barely moved their faint leaves.[1]

The experience of studying George Whitefield's understanding of the field of biblical criticism is much like being a stranger in Marseilles on that hot August day. Most of the time, the work is a tedious staring at page after page of texts of his sermons, his letters, and his journal entries, only to discover them staring back at you with a blank, almost defiant look, revealing none of the secrets hidden behind their walls of gospel messages. Then occasionally, and only occasionally, do the grape vines wink, and a slight glimmer of truth about Whitefield's beliefs concerning biblical criticism breaks through to add a sparkle of color to the day. This article presents those "winks."

The purpose of the article, therefore, is to reveal Whitefield's recorded beliefs regarding the nature of Scripture and the relationship of those beliefs to the biblical-critical issues of his day. To achieve those goals, this research produces a brief overview of the man and his times in relation to the field of biblical criticism. To explicate that relationship more fully, this article assesses the reasons why Whitefield, in general, appeared to be "impervious" to the forces of biblical criticism and what, in fact, his avowed beliefs were concerning the nature of Scripture. Next a warning is issued regarding the need to evaluate Whitefield's statements regarding Scripture both in the context in which they were delivered and in the context of his life. Finally, this paper identifies the contributions that Whitefield made to the field of biblical criticism.

---

[1]Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.

I

Because much has been written concerning the oratorical prowess and the evangelistic zeal of George Whitefield (1714–1770),[2] this discussion of the man and his times focuses on the relationship of Whitefield to biblical-critical issues. Essentially, Whitefield was an evangelist,[3] not a biblical critic. His interest lay in the proclamation of the Word of God, rather than in its analysis.[4] This truth is graphically borne out by the almost total lack of mention of biblical-critical issues in his sermons, letters, and journal entries.[5] Not once in the recorded sermons of Whitefield did he make the focus of his address the nature of Scripture,[6] much less that of the issues of biblical criticism.[7]

---

[2]See bibliography. Generally speaking, there is little difference among the major biographical treatments of Whitefield's life. Most present the same anecdotes as found in the other works and only rarely offer any new insight into his character, oratorical style, and evangelistic results. Stout's work is the most recent work and thus presents a contemporary view of Whitefield's life. It is easy to read and would make a good entry point for any research into the life of Whitefield. Henry's volume, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness*, though somewhat dated, is, however, unlike the other biographies in that it assesses the theology and faith of the man as well as the Christian and secular forces that shaped his work. Its brief analysis of those component parts of Whitefield's life and ministry perhaps offers the best insight into the inner workings of the evangelist and into the climate of his times. Unfortunately, none of the works on Whitefield—whether in the form of a biographical analysis or a research article—offer any data on Whitefield relative to the field of biblical criticism.

[3]Belden records that "[i]t is estimated that . . . [Whitefield] preached the gospel . . . to no less than ten million souls in England, Wales, Scotland, and America." Albert D. Belden, *George Whitefield—The Awakener: A Modern Study of the Evangelical Revival* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., n.d. [1930?]), 446.

[4]Crump correctly notes that "Whitefield was not as concerned with subtleties of biblical exegesis as he was with a straight-forward explanation of the passage which could be followed by his audience and lend itself to a clear-cut application of the gospel." David Crump, "The Preaching of George Whitefield and His Use of Matthew Henry's *Commentary*," *Crux* 25 (September 1989): 22.

[5]Whitefield wrote only a few short theological tracts. His theological views generally were never expressed, except as components of his sermons.

Although Whitefield did not write theologies or commentaries of the Bible as such, his sermons, on occasions sounded much like theological commentaries, especially when he focused on the exposition of a specific text of Scripture, e.g., Gen 3:1–15 (W-WORKS V:3–20—Sermon I: "The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent"), Gen 22:1–18 (W-WORKS V:38–51—Sermon III: "Abraham's Offering Up His Son Isaac"), and Matt 4:1–11 (W-WORKS V:265–275—Sermon XVII: "The Temptation of Christ"). Unless otherwise noted, all sermons are taken from George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield . . .*, vols. V, VI (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772).

[6]This fact is intriguing in light of Whitefield's high regard for the veracity and authority of Scripture. It is an especially curious feature considering the importance that Whitefield attached to the Scripture and considering his vast knowledge of it. His sermons were replete with Scripture references; so too were his personal correspondences. For example, in the nearly 200 letters researched for this paper, almost 100 percent contain some reference to a specific Bible passage, and rarely did Whitefield ever use the same passage twice to illustrate his points—a strong indicator of his depth of understanding of biblical truth.

[7]The closest Whitefield came even to addressing the nature of Scripture itself was in a sermon titled, "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures." The focus of that sermon, however, was the need for Christians to study the Word of God so that they might grow in their understanding of God and of how they should live their lives. W-WORKS VI: 79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures," 80.

Whitefield, however, was not ignorant of the challenges to the orthodox faith posed by biblical critics. He was cognizant of the various trends of religious thought that surrounded him, such as deism, rationalism, Catholicism, and paganism, but he chose (consciously or unconsciously) not to focus his attention on those matters. He was an evangelist of God who concerned himself first and foremost with the spread of the gospel through his sermons, letters, eleemosynary activities (e.g., his work as founder of and fund-raiser for an orphanage in Georgia),[8] and academic endeavors (e.g., his founding of the "Charity School" on Christian principles which later was to become the University of Pennsylvania).[9] Yet, Whitefield's stance regarding the validity of the advocated positions of those non-evangelical forces of his day can (to some extent) be gleaned from an assessment of both his use of and his stated beliefs about Scripture as observed in his published works. What follows presents the results of that gleaning process.

II

In essence, Whitefield was a man on a mission. He had little time for (in fact, he had a great repugnance for) that which he considered would distract him from his God-given task of evangelizing Great Britain and America.

The 18th century forces of rationalism, Deism, Pietism, and traditionalism that might have successfully enticed other individuals to move away from an orthodox understanding of biblical inspiration and infallibility failed to draw Whitefield in that direction. They failed, in part, because of the personality of the man, and, in part, because of his belief system. That Whitefield was able to resist the siren of biblical criticism was undoubtedly due, at a minimum, to the following five reasons:

1. His complete dedication to the text of Scripture derived from his study of the Word of God. Scripture was the driving force of Whitefield's life. He resolved to know the truths contained therein and, hence, meditated on the Word day and night.[10] Furthermore, because of his firm belief in the text of Scripture being the Word of God right down to the very words themselves, he developed the habit of "'praying over every line and word' of both the English and the Greek till the passage, in its essential message, has veritably become part of his own soul."[11]

---

[8]Belden, *George Whitefield—The Awakener: A Modern Study of the Evangelical Revival*, 89–99.

[9]William Joseph Thompson, "George Whitefield: Educator and University Founder," *Methodist Review* 109 (May 1926): 352.

[10]Whitefield, *Journals*, 48.

[11]Whitefield, *Journals*, 60; Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, I:3. This habit, developed early in his ministry, set him in good stead when later during his major evangelistic campaigns when he was preaching forty to sixty hours a week, with almost no time for preparation, he could draw upon the rich store of Biblical knowledge which was buried deep within him. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, I:83.

Concomitantly, Whitefield saw little advantage in studying anything other than that which would contribute to his understanding of Scripture.[12] In fact, he despised education that was committed solely to the advancement of human knowledge.[13]

Such a commitment to the study of the Scripture as it came off the pens of its divinely inspired authors submerged any tendencies that Whitefield might have had to engage in a biblical-critical analysis of the text.

2. His commitment to orthodox sources for his theological input. Whitefield "built a hedge of orthodoxy" around himself in an attempt to keep himself focused on the orthodox understanding of the Word of God. His theological "mentors," therefore, were evangelical books and evangelical scholars. His primary sources of theological knowledge (apart from the Scriptures themselves) were Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Clarke's *Bible*, Burkitt's and Henry's *Expositions*, Alleine's *Alarm*, Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and Janeway's *Life*.[14] None of these works, moreover, was dedicated to biblical-critical issues.

Furthermore, Whitefield's most significant human source for theological input was John Wesley, who also had little to do with the biblical criticism that was rampant during the 18th century.

Although Whitefield did befriend the deist Benjamin Franklin, he (Whitefield) emerged unscathed by Franklin's persuasive charisma and maintained his strong commitment to the orthodox doctrine of Scripture.

3. His immediate negative reaction to any teaching which contradicted his understanding of Scripture. Whitefield's natural personality, when coupled with his religious convictions, caused him to react vehemently against any doctrine that opposed an evangelical interpretation of Scripture. For example, in his sermons, Whitefield rejected (among other belief-systems) the doctrines of Arianism, Socinianism, Arminianism, antinomianism, Deism, and Catholicism.[15] His frontal assaults against these teachings ensured that he would

---

[12]Whitefield made his feelings known about the valuelessness of human literature as follows: "I have made this digression from the main point before us, not to condemn or decry human literature, but to shew, that it ought to be used only in subordination to divine; and that a christian, if the Holy Spirit guided the pen of the Apostle, when he wrote this epistle [1 Corinthians], ought to study no books, but such as lead him to a farther knowledge of Jesus Christ, and him crucified." W-WORKS VI:203–213—Sermon XLV: "The Knowledge of Jesus Christ the Best Knowledge," 209.

Furthermore, Whitefield decried the growing trend in his day for evangelicals to spend their time reading non-evangelical material: "Bad books are become fashionable among the tutors and students. Tillotson and Clark are read, instead of Shepard, Stoddard, and such-like evangelical writers . . . ." Whitefield, *Journals*, 462.

[13]Whitefield, *Journals*, 371, 372.

[14]Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, I:82; Andrews, *George Whitefield: A Light Rising in Obscurity*, 423; Crump, "The Preaching of George Whitefield and His Use of Matthew Henry's *Commentary*," 23.

[15]W-WORKS V:319–335—Sermon XXII: "The Folly and Danger of Parting with Christ for the Pleasures and Profits of Life," 330, 331; W-WORKS V:216–234—Sermon XIV: "The Lord our

not adhere to any non-orthodox methodological or theological approaches advocated by those beliefs.[16]

One specific biblical-critical issue that Whitefield did attack head on, however, was that view which argued that the Scripture should be read simply as a history and as nothing more, the primary worth of Scripture then being for those who were contemporaries of the writers of the various books of Scripture. Whitefield considered this view particularly damaging to the average person's understanding of Scripture in general and of the atonement of Christ in particular.[17] Whitefield thus declared the fallacy of such a belief, thereby, at least in his own mind, "laid it to rest."

4. His lack of time and willingness to consider anything that detracted from his communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Very simply, Whitefield's whirlwind ministry of evangelism kept him too busy to allow him the time to concern himself with the issues of biblical criticism. Crumb describes the heavy workload which Whitefield experienced:

> He [Whitefield] regularly preached in the open air before spell-bound crowds of 10,000 to even 30,000. He did this 40 to 60 hours per week, as often as seven times a day, seven days a week, for most of his working life. His total number of delivered sermons has been estimated at 18,000, and this figure does not include informal gatherings which Whitefield called 'exhortings.' If all of these speaking occasions are combined, his total number of messages reaches 30,000 to 40,000 in number.[18]

Moreover, Whitefield seemed to exhibit little interest in analyzing or even expounding on the doctrine of Scripture. Not once in his recorded sermons did he make the focus of his address the issue of the nature of Scripture, much less, biblical criticism.[19] Furthermore, neither did he make biblical criticism nor any of the multi-faceted components of that field the subject of his wriings. His concern was a single-minded focus of preaching the message of eternal salvation.[20]

Righteousness," 218; W-WORKS VI:20–35—Sermon XXXIII: "The Gospel Supper," 34; W-WORKS VI: 49–63—Sermon XXXV: "The Conversion of *Zaccheus*," 56; W-WORKS VI: 187–202—Sermon XLIV: "Christ the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," 200.

[16]Much to Whitefield's credit, at least in the eyes of this author, he did not spend an inordinate amount of time—no more than a few minutes in any one of his sermons—criticizing his opponents, arguments. His paramount focus was on the explication of the gospel message to his audience.

[17]W-WORKS VI:89–102—Sermon XXXVIII: "The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers," 89.

[18]Crumb, "The Preaching of George Whitefield and His Use of Matthew Henry's *Commentary*," 19.

[19]Only in W-WORKS VI:79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures," did Whitefield have as its primary theme the Scriptures themselves. Yet even this sermon does not address biblical-critical issues but rather focuses on the need for people to study and apply the Scripture.

[20]Walter B. T. Douglas, "George Whitefield: The Man and His Mission." *Methodist History* 16 (October 1977): 52.

In general, in his sermons, Whitefield skirted potentially volatile issues, if those issues were deemed by him to be fringe issues, i.e., not critical to the main point of his address.[21] He undoubtedly had his fill of controversy on the issues which he considered vital to his cause—the issues of "(1) Original sin; (2) The new birth; (3) Justification by faith in Christ; (4) The final perseverance of the saints; (5) Eternal and unconditional election."[22]

5. His physical and psychological isolation from the primary forums of biblical-critical debate. Few Americans (at least among Whitefield's audiences) in the 18th century cared much about the religious scene in Europe, and even less about the issues of biblical criticism.[23] They, for the most part, were Bible-believing (or at least Bible-accepting) people who generally understood the Bible to be a (the) trustworthy source of divine revelation.[24] Thus, Whitefield, being the consummate communicator that he was, avoided presenting the various philosophical arguments and assumptions of the numerous positions so as not to confuse his audiences.[25]

Whitefield himself was generally isolated from the main European battlegrounds of biblical criticism by physical distance,[26] constant travels for evangelistic meetings,[27] and language barriers.[28] Moreover, even while in Great

---

[21]For example, he chose not to offer his views on Daniel's Seventy-Weeks prophecy in a sermon titled "The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness." W-WORKS V:235–250—Sermon XV: "The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness," 239.

[22]R. Elliot, "A Summary of Gospel Doctrine Taught by Mr. Whitefield, Recorded in a Funeral Sermon on His Death," in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon*, with an account of his life by J. C. Ryle and a summary of his doctrine by R. Elliot (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 52.

[23]Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, 110.

[24]Timothy L. Smith, "Introduction: George Whitefield and the Wesleyan Witness," chap. in *Whitefield & Wesley on the New Birth* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 12–14; Whitefield, "The Nature and Necessity of our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus," 70, 71.

[25]Whether Whitefield himself was cognizant of the details of the issues of biblical criticism in his day is debatable. He makes almost no reference to those concerns in any of his writings (letters or journals) or in any of his sermons. Furthermore, none of his biographers nor do any of his contemporaries—at least to the knowledge of this author—make mention of his involvement in biblical-critical affairs.

[26]Whitefield spent numerous years on the American continent in his evangelistic work and, hence, because of logistic issues would have had some minor difficulties keeping current on the ongoing debates over biblical-critical concerns (assuming that he even had the desire to be informed of the ideas of non-evangelicals).

[27]Whitefield's typical ministry pattern, whether he was in America or Great Britain, was to move from city to city, staying only long enough to proclaim the gospel a sufficient number of times to ensure that the general populace had a full opportunity to hear and respond. In smaller cities, therefore, he would stay only for a few days at most, but he would remain in larger cities for a week or two at a time, before he departed to preach elsewhere.

[28]As a result of his studies at Oxford, Whitefield was capable of doing basic translation work from Greek and Latin into English, apparently becoming highly proficient in Latin during his school years. There is, however, no record of which this author is aware that indicates that Whitefield possessed any knowledge whatsoever of either French or German, the primary continental languages

Britain, a European center for radical Deism,[29] his thoughts focused primarily on the evangelization of the people living there or on the raising funds for his evangelistic and eleemosynary work in America. Thus, in these ways, Whitefield maintained his distance from the biblical-critical problems of his day.

III

This section pictures the essential characteristics of Whitefield's doctrine of Scripture as drawn primarily from his sermons. It summarizes and categorizes much of the Whitefield-originated material presented above, with a view to explicating Whitefield's doctrine of Scripture that ran counter to the biblical criticism thrust of his day.

Historical Reliability of Scripture

According to the Socinian teaching of Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), "God accommodated portions of the Bible to the understanding of the contemporaries of the biblical authors. Small errors occur in those passages where the Bible's human authors incorporate contemporary opinions about history and the natural world, even if these opinions were not 'truthful.' "[30]

Whitefield vehemently disagreed. According to Whitefield, the Bible in its totality is an entirely true rendering of the events it records, for God, the author of Scripture, cannot lie.[31] Where an apparent or a real contradiction occurs between extra-biblical sources and the Bible, those extra-biblical sources must be harmonized with the Bible, and not the Bible with those sources.

What 18th century Deism and rationalism had difficulty accepting and often outright rejected were the veracity of biblical miracles, prophecies,

---

in which much of the biblical-critical debates occurred. Furthermore, it is almost a certainty that he did not know Italian, a third language in which some (albeit to a lesser degree than French or German) of the biblical-critical writings were generated. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, I:90; John D. Woodbridge, "Recent Interpretations of Biblical Authority Part III: Does the Bible Teach Science?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (July–September 1985): 204; Gregg Allison, "Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi (1742–1831): A Sketch of His Life and Works, with Particular Attention Given to His Contribution to the Field of Biblical Criticism," *Trinity Journal* 12 (Spring 1991): 15–38.

[29]Unlike the German scholars of the later half of the eighteenth century, many of the English deists had rejected even the notion of the Bible being a worthy source of religious truth. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, 113.

[30]John D. Woodbridge, "Chapter Seven: Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the 'Enlightenment' on the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986), 256.

[31]W-WORKS VI:89–102—Sermon XXXVIII: "The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers," 96.

events, and people.[32] Whitefield, by contrast, believed them to be true. For example, Whitefield argued that biblical miracles happened exactly as the Bible declares them to have happened.[33]

Likewise, Whitefield maintained that biblical prophecies anticipate a tangible fullfillment—many of the Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in the New Testament, and all prophecies as of yet unfulfilled, being tangibly fulfilled one day.[34]

In addition, in sermon after sermon and on page after page of his writings, Whitefield presented a whole host of biblical characters—the famous and the not so famous, the spiritual and the wicked, those who performed miracles and those who experienced miracles—yet, never once did he indicate or even intimate either that any of the characters might be mythical or that the events associated with their lives did not occur. He was able, however, to distinguish between those characters which the Bible presented as fictional, e.g., those found in parables, and those which it presented as real. Thus, Whitefield accepted the Bible to be fully historically reliable.

Canonical Concerns

Biblical critics of the 18th century challenged the traditional orthodox understanding of the canon. Some advocated the existence of "a canon within a canon"; others suggested the elimination of the canon concept altogether. Semler (1725–1791), for example, argued (on historical grounds) for the need to make a clear distinction between the ideas of "Scripture" and "Word of God."[35] As a result, the canon of Scripture was no longer considered to be of divine origin; its validity depended on the needs of the times and of the needs of the individual assessing the religious worth of the individual books (or portions of books).

In direct contrast to Semler[36] and to others who held to a reduced canon, Whitefield maintained that the canon of Scripture consisted of the sixty-six

---

[32]Krentz briefly traces the shift in belief regarding biblical authority through the seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth. He contends that "[a]t the beginning of the seventeenth century the Bible was the universal authority in all fields of knowledge, but by the end of the century that authority was eroded." Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11.

[33]See the section entitled *Rationalism and Deism* above.

[34]For example, future judgment will come and will bring with it literal judgment; the Church which is the bride of Christ will one day in heaven experience a literal fulfillment of the wedding feast prophecies; and the promise of a seed in Genesis 3:15 was literally fulfilled in Christ Jesus. W-WORKS V:353–372—Sermon XXIV: "What Think Ye of Christ?" 372; W-WORKS V:373–391—Sermon XXV: "The Wise and Foolish Virgins," 375; W-WORKS V:3–20—Sermon I: "The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent," 16, 17.

[35]David G. Dunbar, "Chapter Nine: The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986), 344, 345.

[36]Semler's *magnum opus*, *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771–1775), actually appeared after Whitefield's death (1770), but the seeds of Semler's approach existed throughout the eighteenth century.

books of the Protestant Bible, each of those books being divinely and equally inspired of God.[37]

Simply stated, Whitefield in his writings and recorded sermons never once questioned or challenged the traditionally-accepted authorship of the various books of the Bible. Furthermore, he specifically attributed the authorship of various biblical books to specific individuals. He believed, for example, that Moses was the author of Genesis;[38] Isaiah the author of all of Isaiah,[39] Paul the author of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Titus, Hebrews;[40] James the author of the book of James;[41] and John the author of 1 John.[42]

Inspiration of Scripture

Whereas the deists and rationalists denied the divine inspiration of Scripture, and the pietists argued in favor of internal personal revelations being divinely inspired and thus on a par with Scripture which is also divinely inspired, Whitefield maintained that the Scriptures alone and in their entirety were "written by the inspiration of God."[43] Whitefield, however, offered no insight into how the process of inspiration occurred.

---

[37]W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 394.

[38]Nowhere does Whitefield suggest anything other than a Mosaic authorship of Genesis or of the entirety of the Pentateuch as did Richard Simon nearly one hundred years earlier, nor does he abide with the view of a contemporary of his, Jean Astruc, that there were separate sources for the origin of the Pentateuch. W-WORKS V:3–20—Sermon I: "The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent," 4; John D. Woodbridge, "Chapter Seven: Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the 'Enlightenment' on the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986), 253; Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 19.

[39]There is no intimation in any of Whitefield's works that he would have been amenable to Doederlein's deutero-Isaiah theory which was first proposed in 1775, five years after Whitefield's death. Whitefield attributed portions of both sections of the book of Isaiah to a single Isaianic authorship. The concept of a trito-Isaiah, moreover, would also have been unthinkable to Whitefield. W-WORKS V:52–64—Sermon IV: "The Great Duty of Family Religion," 61; W-WORKS V:79–93—Sermon VI: "*Britain's* Mercies, and *Britain's* Duty." Preached at *Philadelphia,* on *Sunday, August* 24, 1746, and occasioned by the Suppression of the late unnatural Rebellion, 85; Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 196.

[40]W-WORKS V:353–372—Sermon XXIV: "What Think Ye of Christ?" 361, 362, 364, 365, 368; W-WORKS V:373–391—Sermon XXV: "The Wise and Foolish Virgins," 373; W-WORKS V: 171–196—Sermon XII: "Christ the Believer's Husband," 175. The author recognizes that the authorship of the book of Hebrews is a debatable issue; Whitefield, however, chose to accept the argument favoring Pauline authorship—a position held by many even today.

[41]W-WORKS V:171–196—Sermon XII: "Christ the Believer's Husband," 187.

[42]W-WORKS V:171–196—Sermon XII: "Christ the Believer's Husband," 187.

[43]W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 398; W-WORKS V:3–20—Sermon I: "The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent," 4; W-WORKS V:21–37—Sermon II: "Walking with God," 21.

Infallibility and Inerrancy of Scripture

Whitefield recorded very little regarding his beliefs on the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. He did argue, however, for the internal consistency of Scripture[44] and for the reliability of Scripture even when its veracity is challenged from external sources.[45] His manner of using the Scripture as the basis for the proclamation of truth in his sermons, moreover, suggests that he assumed the orthodox position of the Scripture's complete infallibility and inerrancy.

Authority of Scripture

Four statements summarize Whitefield's position relative to his understanding of the authoritative nature of Scripture:

1. The Scripture is the actual Word of God and, as such, it carries with it the supreme weight in any discussion of truth, for Scripture is truth. Human reason or feeling, according to Whitefield, do not stand as final authorities in the presence of Scripture, no matter how greatly the desire is on the part of the humans to restructure or reinterpret truth to meet their needs. For example, although humans may disagree with the doctrine of human depravity as taught in Scripture, that doctrine, Whitefield states, remains true despite their protestations or alternative theories simply because it is presented as truth in the Scripture.[46] Scripture therefore functions as a corrective to and a check against human error.[47]

2. Scripture provides the foundation for the development of all true religion.[48] True religion, in Whitefield's schema, comes neither from human reason or insight, nor even from human interpretations of the Bible (e.g., from a reading of the early Church Fathers);[49] it comes from the Bible and from the Bible alone.

3. All parts of Scripture are equally authoritative and thus may be equally cited in the development of doctrinal truth. Whitefield, however, recognized the difference between the Old and New Testaments relative to the progress of revelation. Where both the Old and New Testaments speak to the same issue, both may be quoted in relation to that topic.[50] Where the New

---

[44]W-WORKS V:38–51—Sermon III: "Abraham's Offering up his Son *Isaac*," 39.
[45]W-WORKS V:262–275—Sermon XVII: "The Temptation of Christ," 266–267.
[46]W-WORKS VI:89–102—Sermon XXXVIII: "The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers," 96; W-WORKS V:287–298—Sermon XIX: "Christ the Support of the Tempted," 289.
[47]W-WORKS VI:79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures," 79.
[48]Whitefield, *Journals*, 48; W-WORKS V:52–64—Sermon IV: "The Great Duty of Family Religion," 59.
[49]Whitefield, *Journals*, 210.
[50]W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 394–395.

Testament provides additional information to that contained in the Old, those new ideas are to be considered in relation to the new dispensation ushered in with the advent of the New Testament.

4. Scripture is normative for the modern reader. Whitefield maintains that Scripture is more than mere history[51]—although it does record history accurately. Scripture, he argues, was designed for modern readers as well as for contemporaries of the Bible writers, "[f]or whatsoever was written [in Scripture] in afore time, was written for our learning."[52] Scripture, therefore, provides guidance for the faith and practice of Christians at all times throughout history.[53]

Unity of Scripture

Whitefield declared that, because both the Old Testament and the New Testament were the Word of the one true God, they were consistent in their teachings.[54] Any contradiction between the two was merely apparent and not real. The interpreter of Scripture then was required to seek a point of harmony between those seeming contradictions.

One such point of harmony for Whitefield was found in the Scripture's use of typology whereby certain components of the Old Testament are seen as types of their counterparts in the New Testament.[55] Typology was particularly evident, for Whitefield, in relationship to the life and work of Jesus Christ,[56] who, according to Whitefield, was the central subject of both the Old

---

[51]W-WORKS VI:89–102—Sermon XXXVIII: "The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers," 89.

[52]W-WORKS V:21–37—Sermon II: "Walking with God," 27.

[53]W-WORKS V:21–37—Sermon II: "Walking with God," 27; W-WORKS V:38–51—Sermon III: "Abraham's Offering up his Son *Isaac*," 38.

[54]W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 394–395; Whitefield, "The Nature and Necessity of our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus," 69.

[55]The use of typology was not unique to Whitefield; it was a common practice among evangelical theologians in the eighteenth century. Whitefield's application of typology to the Scriptures, however, appears to be far more controlled than that of other theologians of his day, for example, Jonathan Edwards. Stein notes that for Edwards, "almost everything in the Old Testament was typical. God used all kinds of things as 'shadows of spiritual [things].'" Stein supports his contention by quoting Edwards ("Theological Miscellanies," 362): "Persons were typical persons, their actions were typical actions, the cities were typical cities, the nation of the Jews and other nations were typical nations, the land was a typical land, God's providences towards them were typical providences, their worship was typical worship, their houses were typical houses, their magistrates typical magistrates, their clothes typical clothes, and indeed, the world was a typical world. . . ." Stein, "The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards," 112; W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 395–396.

[56]For example, Whitefield believed that the Bible pictured, on certain occasions, both the nation of Israel and King David as types of Christ. W-WORKS V:262–275—Sermon XVII: "The Temptation of Christ," 265; George Whitefield, "Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," in *Whitefield & Wesley on the New Birth*, Timothly L. Smith (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 123.

and New Testaments.[57] From Whitefield's vantage point, however, the application of the principle of typology could not be done at the whim of the interpreter but was to be controlled by the immediate context of the given scriptural passages under consideration or by the direct statements of Scripture.[58]

In the final analysis, in Whitefield's way of thinking, the sixty-six books of Holy Writ were (as Henry summarizes Whitefield's position) "a single volume of one texture and of equal value throughout."[59]

IV

As Whitefield urged in relation to the study of Scripture, that truth is found only through the study of a passage in its context, we too must apply the same principle to the understanding of the statements made by Whitefield himself. If we fail to do so, then we will discover that the Whitefield we have "uncovered" is a Whitefield who advocates an allegorical reading of Scripture,[60] that proclaims the existence of a "canon within the Canon,"[61] that places extra-biblical teaching on a par with Scripture,[62] and that declares

---

[57]Whitefield urged his audiences to "[l]ook, therefore, always for Christ in the Scripture. He is the treasure hid in the field both of the Old and New Testament. In the Old, you will find Him under prophecies, types, sacrifices, and shadows; in the New, manifested in the flesh, to become a propitiation for our sins as a Priest, and as a Prophet to reveal the whole will of His heavenly Father.

"Have Christ, then, always in view when you are reading the word of God. . . ." W-WORKS VI:79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures," 82–83.

Douglas' analysis of Whitefield suggests that Whitefield practiced what he preached. Douglas writes: "Whitefield found Christ everywhere: he found him everywhere in the Bible, in the Old Testament no less than [in] the New . . . : he found him everywhere, no less, in his own everyday experience, and his one consuming desire was to bring others to Him." Douglas, "George Whitefield: The Man and His Mission," 52.

[58]W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 395–396.

[59]Henry, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness*, 97.

[60]In the following excerpt from one of Whitefield's sermons, the phrase "in a spiritual sense" is better understood to convey what we today would call "application" rather than "allegory": "Thus far the letter of the story [of the disciples in the ship with Jesus asleep during the storm that occurred after the Gergesene demoniac incident] goes; perhaps you think there is nothing to be learned herefrom, and that this is all you are to understand by it; but if so, my brethren, you are much mistaken; for here is an excellent lesson to be learned, and that you will see, by considering the words again, in a spiritual sense." W-WORKS V:319–335—Sermon XXII: "The Folly and Danger of Parting with Christ for the Pleasures and Profits of Life," 323.

[61]In his sermon entitled "What Think Ye of Christ?" Whitefield uses the clauses "Search the scriptures" and "Search St. *Paul*'s epistles" in a parallel sense to indicate that he is referring to the same entity—much like Hebrew symmetrical poetry equates one line with the next. The relevant portion of Whitefield's sermon reads: "Search the scriptures as the *Bereans* did, and see whether these things are not so. Search St. *Paul*'s epistles to the *Romans* and *Galatians*, and there you will find this doctrine so plainly taught you, that, unless you have eyes and see not, he that runs may read." W-WORKS V:353–372—Sermon XXIV: "What Think Ye of Christ?" 361, 362.

[62]Despite his use of the clause "Search the *Eleventh Article* of our Church" in parallel to "Search the scriptures" (see previous note), Whitefield in no way implies that the two documents are to

Scripture to contain truth rather than to be "truth."[63] As observed above, a proper analysis of Whitefield in the context of his life-messages will disprove each of these fallacious claims.

V

Essentially, George Whitefield was an orator, perhaps the most influential orator of his day. He was an evangelist with a single-minded purpose of proclaiming the gospel message that all humans are sinners and are in need of the salvation that only Jesus Christ can provide. Furthermore, because his focus was so concentrated, Whitefield did not unduly concern himself with issues of biblical criticism. Yet, despite his seeming lack of interest, we are able to draw three conclusions regarding Whitefield's impact on the field of biblical criticism:

1. He offered no innovative way of thinking that moved him out of the orthodox understanding of the doctrine of Scripture, a view which, adhering to the teachings of the Reformers, considered the entirety of Scripture to be infallible and without error.[64]

2. He demonstrated that an orthodox position of biblical inspiration, infallibility, and authority can be maintained in the face of pressure to the contrary and that converts to that position can be made through a consistent kerygma that assumes and conveys the reliability of Scripture.

3. He presented an example of an individual who successfully integrated his beliefs regarding Scripture into the practical outworking of his life.

The Arabs have a proverb which roughly translated says, "He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes."[65] Whitefield epitomized that proverb. His strengths were in his presentation of a "*singularly pure gospel*" message and not in the development of arguments in favor of his stance relative to biblical criticism. Future researchers on the life of Whitefield, therefore, are encouraged to concentrate their efforts on securing a fuller understanding of Whitefield's oratorical gifts.

---

be understood as being of equal weight. In fact, Whitefield never once suggests that the *Articles* of the Anglican Church are inspired, whereas he frequently declares the divine inspiration of the Scripture. W-WORKS V:353–372—Sermon XXIV: "What Think Ye of Christ?" 361, 362.

[63]"I take it for granted farther, That you believe a divine revelation; that those books, emphatically called the Scriptures, were written by inspiration of God, and that the things therein contained, are founded upon eternal truth." W-WORKS V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia, 394. Whitefield elsewhere indicates that Scripture is "true." See W-WORKS VI:79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures," 82; and W-WORKS V:456–474—Sermon XXXI: "The Care of the Soul Urged as the One Thing Needful," 457.

[64]Woodbridge, "Recent Interpretations of Biblical Authority Part I: A Neoorthodox Historiography under Siege," 4, 12.

[65]J. C. Ryle, "George Whitefield and His Ministry," in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon*, with an account of his life by J. C. Ryle and a summary of his doctrine by R. Elliot (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 35.

APPENDIX
LIST OF WHITEFIELD'S RECORDED SERMONS

V:3–20—Sermon I:	"The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent."
V:21–37—Sermon II:	"Walking with God."
V:38–51—Sermon III:	"Abraham's Offering up his Son *Isaac*."
V:52–64—Sermon IV:	"The Great Duty of Family Religion."
V:65–78—Sermon V:	"Christ the Best Husband: Or an Earnest Invitation to Young Women to Come and See Christ," preached to a Society of Young Women, in *Fetter-Lane*.
V:79–93—Sermon VI:	"*Britain's* Mercies, and *Britain's* Duty." Preached at *Philadelphia*, on *Sunday, August* 24, 1746. and occasioned by the Suppression of the late unnatural Rebellion.
V:94–106—Sermon VII:	"Thankfulness for Mercies Received, a Necessary Duty." A Farewell Sermon preached on board the *Whitaker*, at Anchor near *Savannah*, in *Georgia*, *Sunday, May* 17, 1738.
V:107–122—Sermon VIII:	"The Necessity and Benefits of Religious Society."
V:123–140—Sermon IX:	"The Folly and Danger of Being Not Righteous Enough."
V:141–158—Sermon X:	"A Preservative against Unsettled Notions, and Want of Principles, in regard to Righteousness and Christian Perfection. Being a more particular Answer to Doctor *Trapp's* Four Sermons upon the same Text."
V:159–169—Sermon XI:	"The Benefits of Early Piety." Preached at *Bow* Church, *London*, before the Religious Societies.
V:171–196—Sermon XII:	"Christ the Believer's Husband."
V:197–215—Sermon XIII:	"The Potter and the Clay."
V:216–234—Sermon XIV:	"The Lord our Righteousness."
V:235–250—Sermon XV:	"The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness."
V:251–261—Sermon XVI:	"The Observation of the Birth of Christ, the Duty of All Christians; or the True Way of Keeping Christmas."
V:262–275—Sermon XVII:	"The Temptation of Christ."
V:276–286—Sermon XVIII:	"The Heinous Sin of Profane Cursing and Swearing."
V:287–298—Sermon XIX:	"Christ the Support of the Tempted."

V:299–307—Sermon XX: "Worldly Business No Plea for the Neglect of Religion."
V:308–318—Sermon XXI: "Christ the Only Rest for the Weary and Heavy-Laden."
V:319–335—Sermon XXII: "The Folly and Danger of Parting with Christ for the Pleasures and Profits of Life."
V:336–352—Sermon XXIII: "Marks of a True Conversion."
V:353–372—Sermon XXIV: "What Think Ye of Christ?"
V:373–391—Sermon XXV: "The Wise and Foolish Virgins."
V:392–403—Sermon XXVI: "The Eternity of Hell-Torments." To the Inhabitants of Savannah in Georgia.
V:404–417—Sermon XXVII: "Blind *Bartimeus*."
V:418–427—Sermon XXVIII: "Directions How to Hear Sermons."
V:428–439—Sermon XXIX: "The Extent and Reasonableness of Self-Denial."
V:440–455—Sermon XXX: "Christ's Transfiguration."
V:456–474—Sermon XXXI: "The Care of the Soul Urged as the One Thing Needful."
VI:4–19—Sermon XXXII: "A Penitent Heart, the Best *New Year's Gift*."
VI:20–35—Sermon XXXIII: "The Gospel Supper."
VI:36–48—Sermon XXXIV: "The Pharisee and Publican."
VI:49–63—Sermon XXXV: "The Conversion of *Zaccheus*."
VI:64–78—Sermon XXXVI: "The Marriage of *Cana*."
VI:79–88—Sermon XXXVII: "The Duty of Searching the Scriptures."
VI:89–102—Sermon XXXVIII: "The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers."
VI:103–126—Sermon XXXIX: "The Resurrection of *Lazarus*."
VI:127–142—Sermon XL: "The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment."
VI:143–160—Sermon XLI: "*Saul*'s Conversion."
VI:161–173—Sermon XLII: "Marks of Having Received the Holy Ghost."
VI:174–186—Sermon XLIII: "The Almost Christian."
VI:187–202—Sermon XLIV: "Christ the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption."
VI:203–213—Sermon XLV: "The Knowledge of Jesus Christ the Best Knowledge."
VI:214–225—Sermon XLVI: "Of Justification by Christ."
VI:227–240—Sermon XLVII: "The Great Duty of Charity Recommended."
VI:241–255—Sermon LXVIII: "Satan's Devices."
VI:257–271—Sermon XLIX: "On Regeneration."
VI:273–286—Sermon L: "Christians, Temples of the Living God."
VI:287–301—Sermon LI: "Christ the Only Preservative Against a Reprobate Spirit."
VI:303–316—Sermon LII: "The Heinous Sin of Drunkenness."
VI:317–329—Sermon LIII: "The Power of Christ's Resurrection."

VI:331–343—Sermon LIV:	"Intercession Every Christian's Duty."
VI:345–360—Sermon LV:	"Persecution Every Christian's Lot."
VI:361–367—Sermon LVI:	"A Exhortation to the People of God Not to be Discouraged in Their Way, by the Scoffs and Contempt of Wicked Men."
VI:369–387—Sermon LVII:	[No title—elsewhere titled: "A Caution Against Despising the Day of Small Things."] Preached before the Governor, and Council, and the House of Assembly, in *Georgia*, on January 28, 1770.
VI:389–408—Sermon LVIII:	"*Peter*'s Denial of His Lord."
VI:409–429—Sermon LIX:	"The True Way of Beholding the Lamb of God."
572–581—Sermon LVIII[66]:	"A Faithful Minister's Parting Blessing." A Farewell Sermon, February 23, 1763.
581–591—Sermon LIX:	"Christ the Believer's Refuge." On the Death of Mr. Beckman.
591–600—Sermon LX:	"Soul Prosperity."
600–611—Sermon LXI:	"The Gospel A Dying Saint's Triumph." A Funeral Sermon.
611–620—Sermon LXII:	"Repentance and Conversion."
620–627—Sermon LXIII:	"Glorifying God in the Fire; or, The Right Improvement of Affliction."
628–636—Sermon LXIV:	"The Beloved of God."
636–645—Sermon LXV:	"The Furnace of Affliction." On the Death of the Rev. Mr. Middleton.
645–653—Sermon LXVI:	"The Lord our Light."
653–662—Sermon LXVII:	"Self-Inquiry Concerning the Work of God."
662–670—Sermon LXVIII:	"The Burning Bush."
670–678—Sermon LXIX:	"Soul Dejection."
678–686—Sermon LXX:	"Spiritual Baptism."
687–696—Sermon LXXI:	"Neglect of Christ the Killing Sin."
697–706—Sermon LXXII:	"All Men's Place."
707–715—Sermon LXXIII:	"God a Believer's Glory."
715–726—Sermon LXXIV:	"Jacob's Ladder."
726–736—Sermon LXXV:	"The Good Shepherd." A Farewell Sermon.

[66]The duplication of numbers LVIII and LIX resulted from the fact that the first group of Sermons, i.e., I through LIX were secured from Whitefield's *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* . . . . 6 vols. London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772., whereas the second group, i.e., LVIII through LXXV were found in Whitefield's *Sermons on Important Subjects* . . . . New ed. With the character, &c. of the author by the Rev. Joseph Smith. London: William Baynes and Son, 1825.